

The goal in handling conflict is to find ways that bring people with differences together in such a way that there is a constructive solution to their differences. The purpose is not for one side to win, but for more creative solutions to occur. Managing conflict means facing conflict and using it creatively. It may be more useful to speak of Conflict TRANSFORMATION than management.

History and Background

Conflict has been part of human history and the biblical story since the beginning. Sometimes, as with Cain and Abel, the solution to conflict is destructive. At other times, as in the New Testament conflict over whether to spread the word of Christ to the Gentiles, constructive change resulted. Jesus didn't try to duck situations that would cause conflict. In fact, he sometimes seemed to ask for trouble. And "trouble" is how many people view conflict.

Conflict often is upsetting. Generally we wish to avoid it and hope the situation causing conflict between groups or individuals will go away. It may, but more than likely, unless something is done to deal with it, it will return.

Some people have come to realize that conflict also serves good purposes when it is organized and not allowed to be open-ended and ongoing. It helps establish the identity of a group and set boundaries. There is going to be

conflict when, for example, the women's organization, which has always had a yard sale in June, hears the youth group announce a yard sale in May. What are the **boundaries** about sales? Could the youth have a yard sale--but in the fall? Could the youth have a sale in May--but a bake sale? Could the youth and women work together with the women showing the youth what they know about prices and the youth doing most of the fetching and lifting and then split the proceeds of a May yard sale? When the conflict is resolved, some boundaries will be clear that weren't before. Some people or groups will be in closer communication than they were previously. Conflict also is a way of reaching goals and making changes. It can enhance group loyalty and increase cohesion. Usually where there is conflict there is some passion and energy; once the conflict is resolved this energy may be even greater. If the women and youth come to a decision about a sale, all these things might happen.

Sometimes fears that conflict is unhealthy can be self-fulfilling. When conflict is not addressed it keeps causing problems. When no one knows where or when to handle differences or even what the real issues are, the conflict is unhealthy, confusing and is left unresolved. In such times it is often helpful to seek assistance from an outside consultant. One must remember that when the church is looking at conflict, it does so as a group of people bound together as believers to a common God and hope.

As they experience and appreciate their differences, the bond is ultimately strengthened.

Common Practices

The most common practice in churches is "ignore it and it will go away." If the youth group and the women's organization both have yard sales because no one dealt with the issue, the immediate irritant will be behind everyone in July but the conflict will still be festering--perhaps for a very long time.

In some churches, leaders are trying to learn how and when to deal with conflict in ways that strengthen relationships. Some churches are less likely to have conflict because the people on committees know what's going on in other groups. When communication takes place before action, unnecessary conflict is avoided.

Responsibilities

A helpful approach to airing conflict will include:

- Choosing the right time and place to get issues aired.
- Listening. Let the group or person know you have heard the idea or feeling.
- Reminding the group of the awareness that God is with us, and brings us into community, sometimes even through disagreements.
- Being aware of the roles which may be appropriate among people in

conflict, either for you or for another leader:

- **Arbitrator.** You or a committee you are on hear and study the positions and make a binding decision. This is possible only if the people having the differences agree that you can make the decision and trust you.
- **Teacher.** You teach about constructive and destructive uses of conflict and present healthy ways to deal with conflict. Then the people can work out conflict for themselves.
- **Advisor.** You don't accept or reject the position of the parties in conflict, but you give them advice about how and where to present their ideas and feelings in order for them to be understood. You may need to help them clarify the issues.
- **Facilitator.** You facilitate interaction without inserting your own position. Help people decide what differences they wish to resolve and what the ground rules are. Lead them through a process they have agreed to follow.
- **Confronter.** When unhealthy conflict is gnawing away and people won't face it, you may have to convince people of what is happening. You may even fan the fires of conflict so that people will acknowledge and face it.
- **Advocate.** Sometimes you know you are a partisan and can't take an unbiased stand. Acknowledge your commitment to let others know where you are.

- Understanding that, wherever there is more than one idea present, there is some level of conflict.
- Welcoming and recognizing some healthy outcomes of conflict.
- Maintaining a non-anxious presence in the face of conflict
- Recognizing when conflict is becoming harmful
- Keeping communication channels open and using them before taking controversial actions.
- Keeping the situation as fluid as possible. Try to avoid making people take public stands unnecessarily because when they are on record, their pride is more involved.
- Helping people know when they need to make a public stand despite possible disagreement
- Helping participants to identify the issue. Often there is a surface problem, but there may be something deeper that is really the issue and resolving the apparent issue won't help in the long run. Maybe the yard sale issue is that the youth always are expected to help with church programs and projects but never get credit or part of the proceeds. Or maybe there is a deeper issue of respect or understanding between the two groups.
- Avoiding too early a reconciliation so that you allow time for the real issues to emerge.
- Keeping the conflict centered on the actual issues--not the people or other concerns
- Encouraging the understanding that disagreement need not mean lack of respect or care.

Skills and Attributes Needed

- A calm, non-anxious approach to conflict. Those who want to “fix” or explain away conflict are not effective in helping groups move through it.
- The ability to recognize conflict, to diagnose its level, and to understand what interventions may be called for.
- The ability to determine the nature of the conflict, to understand who is involved and what kind of issues may really be at stake. People have conflict over values, goals, strategies and personalities. The conflict between the youth group and the women is probably less about the strategy of a yard sale than about communication, respect and mutual value.
- The ability to choose an appropriate role and to adapt to the changing face of the conflict.
- Be able to determine appropriate structures to solve the conflict. People can make decisions for the church only if other members know these people and are willing to listen to their decisions. Likewise, there may be few people in the church who are not perceived to have a stake in the conflict.
- Understanding of the need for outside intervention in destructive levels of conflict.

Ways to Increase Skills, Knowledge and Effectiveness

- Read **Managing Church Conflict** by Hugh F. Halverstadt (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), **Preaching about Conflict in the Local Church** by William H. Willimon (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1987), **Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement without Giving In** by Roger Fisher and William L. Ury, Harvard Negotiation Project (New York: Penguin Books, 1991) rev ed.
- Use resources such as **Discover Your Conflict Management Style, Leadership and Conflict, Moving Your Church through Conflict, and How to Deal Constructively with Clergy-Lay Conflict**, all by Speed B. Leas, published by the Alban Institute. These resources and a catalog of current publications are available from the Alban Institute, www.alban.org, or 800 486-1318.
- Learn about how to talk about what matters while avoiding destructive conflict. Read **Difficult Conversations: Taking Risks, Acting with Integrity** by Katie Day, published by the Alban Institute (see above).
- Attend a “Healthy Congregations” workshop sponsored by the Lombard Mennonite Peace Center, or ask your association or conference to invite them to present one in your area.
- Gather with others to talk about conflict and your faith.

- Pray for insight and clarity and for the participants in the conflict.

Issues Facing the Church

- Some people look at conflict as an evil to be avoided. Others fail to see its dangers. How can the church avoid either extreme?
- People who think and act alike have fewer areas for conflict. Churches like the United Church of Christ value diversity. How can we approach the challenges of conflict which are part of being a diverse church?
- Often a church will have frequent conflicts over seemingly minor differences. How can a congregation explore its “conflict-prone” behavior and learn new ways of working together?

Questions

- What is conflict?
- What are the dangers of conflict?
- What is good about conflict?
- Who has been helpful in a conflict situation with which you are familiar in your church? How do you think they were helpful?
- In the illustration of the yard sale, what do you think the conflict may really be about?